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ABSTRACT

If developmental studies programs are to successfully enhance affective and cognitive development in a non-competitive, supportive setting, they must abandon traditional A to F grading in favor of a descriptive, personalized feedback system that helps the student make intelligent decisions concerning his/her academic future. Indeed, research demonstrates that traditional grading is grossly inappropriate to developmental instruction for a variety of reasons: normative grading merely ranks learners from best to worst and thus precludes individualized learning assistance; grades are not indicative of learning acquisition and thus do not adequately inform the student of his/her progress; grades are not predictive of future success; poor grades, rather than motivating students toward better performance, reinforce a sense of failure; and, finally, grades foster a "Watergate" mentality which sanctions cheating in order to survive the grading game. As a more appropriate alternative, feedback concerning student progress should be effected through instructor/student conferences and through written, descriptive evaluations. If a letter grade is necessary for institutional reporting, it should merely denote completed student contact hours. Such an evaluation approach, which is commonly used at the graduate level, is in total accordance with the non-traditional, innovative nature of developmental learning. (JP)

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DE-GRADING DEVELOPMENTAL STUDIES

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DE-GRADING DEVELOPMENTAL STUDIES

Developmental Studies Programs and courses (designed to assist college students in their academic and interpersonal skill development) are by definition and persuasion learning/learner-oriented.

> "The courses described as developmental range from remedial-type reading courses, through basic writing, mathematics, science, and advanced study techniques. They generally cover all levels of academic achievement and consist of individualized, descriptive laboratory experiences as well as large-group lecture approaches."[1]

These programs and courses emphasize affective and cognitive development in a non-competitive, highly supportive setting. As Frank Christ explains:

> "A learning assistance center will be any place where learners, learning data, and learning facilitators are interwoven into a sequential, cybernetic, individualized, people-oriented system to service all students (learners) and faculty (learning facilitators) of any institution for where learning by its students is important."[2]

The issue raised: What part does evaluation, in general, and traditional grades, in particular, play in a learning assistance program like developmental studies? Do the traditional A through F grades have a legitimate place in the reporting phase of an authentic developmental skills support system? Or, if not, are there any viable alternatives to the present A through F grading system?

To Grade or Not to Grade

Today none would argue that some sort of evaluation and reporting system is essential to the learning process. However, for this evaluative effort and its subsequent feedback to be meaningful and useful, it must be informative, substantive, and uniquely personal.[3] In a learning assistance program where the process is paramount to the product, the immediate concern is what form should the reporting take, and to whom should the reporting be made.

> "Learning assistance differs from content instruction in its emphasis, not on facts and information, but rather on the learning process and on the skills and attitudes of the individual learner."[4]

Essentially, then, the unique educational experience afforded student in a developmental program requires a grading system (should one be imposed) that will reflect the non-traditional nature of the service offered. Furthermore, students seeking developmental help need a descriptive, personalized feedback system if they are going to make intelligent, educated decisions effecting their academic futures. However, as will be demonstrated, the present traditional grading system is grossly inappropriate and useless for such decisions.

Exploding Traditional Grades: What Research Says

Traditional grades, A through F, and their adulterated forms (P/F, C/NC, S/U/I, etc.) are based on a normative system, a system of performance-clustering centered around some standard of excellence. In

other words, academic grading, literally speaking, is ranking learners from best to worst in relation to one another.[5] This ranking characteristic becomes even more obvious when one considers the very popular practice of grading on the normal curve. Needless to say, such a system qua ranking by its very nature precludes the possiblity of any authentic, people-oriented learning assistance. And yet, developmental support systems across the nation are coerced into reporting student growth in the affective as well as the cognitive areas by using the widely accepted, strictly traditional, normative marking system A through F. The stated pretext for this forced compliance is that traditional A through F grades serve such administrative and educational functions as informing, predicting future performance, and motivating learners.

Grades Inform

In the light of the prevailing research, the information content of traditional grades is very low.[6, 7, 8, 9] High grades are not necessarily indicative of skill mastery or knowledge acquisition. These grades AT MOST represent a global generalization of accomplishment tainted by such non-academic factors as punctuality, attendance, neatness and student effort.

Traditional grades also employ arbitrary standards which vary from year to year. Past and present grade inflation accusations in the midst of documented declining aptitude and basic competencies speak to this arbitrary and capricious characteristic.[10, 11] These less than

flattering trends only serve to underscore the emptiness of traditional grades. This inherent inanity becomes even more blatant when an institution of higher learning futilely attempts to give meaning and substance to its marking system by adding pluses (+) and minuses (-) to letter grades. This ploy is tantamount to prescribing a bromide for a viral infection - only the symptoms are treated, but the underlying disease goes unchecked.

> "Without evaluation, grades are meaningless, with evaluation, they are unnecessary. Obviously educators need to spend more time developing and implementing better feedback and evaluation devices which are more useful to the learner."[12]

Grades Predict

Over the years, traditional grades have been thought of as useful predictors of future success. However, typical studies in this area indicate quite the contrary. Secondary level grades received one year have been found to correlate only about 0.60 with subsequent years' grades.[13] At the post-secondary level, grades in particular occupational fields show almost no relationship to subsequent occupational success.[14] Barr, after summarizing thirty-three studies of teacher effectiveness, found that GPA's correlated 0.09 with later on-the-job ratings given by teacher supervisors.[15] Price,[16] Martin, and Pacheres[17] found similar results when investigating the highly skill-oriented, performance-based areas of medicine and engineering respectively. Heath concluded that for all practical purposes, "A man's final summary grade in college predicts almost nothing ten to fifteen

years later."[18] Hoyt, after reviewing over forty studies dating back as far as 1917, also concluded:

> "Although this area of research is plagued by many theoretical, experimental, measurement, and statistical difficulties, present evidence strongly suggests that the college grades bear little or no relationship to any measures of adult accomplishment."[19]

Documented variations found in teacher judgement as they relate to grades as well as the inclusion of non-academic factors into the grading process show traditional grades to have a very negligible predictive validity.[20, 21, 22, 23, 24]

Grades Motivate

Contrary to educational folklore, there is little evidence supporting the contention that grades supply strong, positive motivation to learn. Although researchers like Chansky[25] and Phillips[26] have found that usually students who receive good grades are motivated by grades, Thayer,[27] however, found also that students that receive poor grades tend to drop out and flee the punitive system. In the light of what we know about human behavior and learning reinforcement theory, this should be no surprise. Ironically though, those students who need encouragement the most are least able to achieve it through the traditional grading system. And yet on the other hand, Chamberlin et. al.[28] found that students can progress without grades. Their study demonstrated that grading is not essential to motivate students. In fact, the results also suggest that traditional grading may even hinder the development of academic and interpersonal skills.

Summarizing, the traditional letter-grading system in general has little or no redeeming social or educational value; grades lack worthwhile information content, grades are poor predictors of success, grades are poor motivators of learning. Along with these shortcomings, grades also tend to foster a "Watergate" morality where students cheat - not to learn - but to survive in the grading game.[29, 30] Needless to say, traditional grades have no legitimate place in a truly supportive developmental studies program.

A Viable Alternative to Traditional Grades

Although many alternatives to traditional grading are found in the literature; such as, pass/fail, blanket grading, contract grading, non-punitive grading, and the like, these alternatives have limitations and disadvantages similar to the traditional A through F grading practices.[31] Regretably, few grading alternatives speak directly to the needs of learning assistance programs and the non-traditional student. Thus, some sort of grading reform is needed in the area of developmental studies programs and courses, if they are to remain student support systems. As learning assistance systems whose primary responsibility is to the student seeking help, whatever reporting system developmental programs and courses use, it must answer this basic question: Does the reporting system deliver the feedback that is needed, when it is needed, to the student who needs it?

Back to the Basics

Interestingly enough, at one time in history, it was the instructor who was graded on the basis of the performance of his students. If an instructor's students were successful in the real world, he was assured more pupils and a flourishing practice. But if his pupils consistently failed, he would soon be unemployed. But traditional grading changed all that. Now, success was not being judged by society but by the teacher in the classroom. Traditional grading made the instructor less accountable for a student's failure. He could now just point to the student's low marks.[32]

Since traditional grades are neither useful nor appropriate for non-traditional instruction, it is suggested that developmental programs and courses employ an alternative reporting system more consistent with their philosophy, role, and function. If the goal of support systems like developmental studies is to develop the full academic and interpersonal potential of each individual student through diagnostic, prescriptive, personalized approaches, then it only follows that the evaluation and reporting system should reflect this uniquely personal characteristic. Consequently, in order to be truly responsive to the needs of the non-traditional student, this evaluation and reporting system must be as exact as possible to enable these students to make intelligent, educated decisions concerning their academic futures. As Chansky points out:

> "As the teacher goes from a system of recording student knowledge, assets and deficits through a numerical and then to a letter system of describing progress, not only does recording become easier but inexact."[33]

To better meet the needs of the non-traditional student, then, it is suggested that along with instructor/student conferences a written, descriptive evaluation be used. This written evaluation could be in the form of a skills checklist with accompanying recommendations for future actions. If a letter "grade" is necessary for institutional reporting, it is suggested that the grade be used in a strictly non-traditional manner. Instead of this global generalization denoting rank, the letter notation would denote completed student contact hours. This grade might be an alpha designation such as Q (Qualified) which would mean that the student completed the required contact hours of instruction. This Q grade would be considered "passing" but would not be included in the overall quality point scale (QPS). In short, the Q grade would denote that the required student contact hours were completed under supervised instruction. *If further information is required, then the evaluation form would need to be reviewed and the student or instructor consulted.*

Interestingly enough, this mode of reporting a "grade" which represents completed hours of exposure to instruction is similar to certain grade desigrations used at the graduate and postgraduate levels. Such grades denote that credit has been awarded, but the work was not subjected to the ranking procedure. Consequently, students can opt to receive an attendance credit grade for elective courses where the traditional A through F grade are inappropriate. This "grading" of attendance is also similar to most community/junior colleges continuing education unit grading policy where grades reflect attendance and exposure to instruction. Generally speaking, then, attendance grades found at the various levels of post secondary education are used when a traditional letter grade is inappropriate.

The stated position is that only an evaluative, descriptive, non-ranking reporting system like the one suggested would be of any value to a non-traditional student seeking academic assistance from a developmental program or course; the primary responsibility of which is to offer the best, most effective, efficient support service possible and to report its use to the college administration in student contact hours completed.

In closing, developmental studies programs and courses cannot assist the non-traditional student effectively in cognitive and affective development by using anachronistic methods and tools. Thus, to insure their continued success, learning assistance programs and courses must continue to advocate their non-traditional position and persuasion in the community of colleges by continuing to embrace innovative approaches and by actively opposing traditional marking and reporting systems that are incompatible with their people-oriented approach.

FOOTNOTES

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